

Creative Digest

The pros and cons of a career as a ghostwriter

Roald Dahl once said 'A person is a fool to become a writer. His only compensation is absolute freedom'.

My response is yes and yes, or yes and no. Or more likely, yes, yes and no. What Dahl was talking about was a Writer who is in the public eye. A writer who can stand up and say their real name. But there's a level beyond this.

Enter the world of the Ghostwriter.

I'm a Ghost Writer. But I don't write autobiographies for Oprah, Cristiano or Posh. This article is a rapid window into what it's like being a ghost in the Advertising, Interactive/Digital and Photography space.

When Dahl says "his only compensation is absolute freedom", we're talking some deep freedom here – even deeper than you'd expect – because in this world, not even the Ghost Writer reveals his true identity to the client – welcome to the next level.

Therefore I could walk past several TV Commercials Directors I have helped win pitches for campaigns worth well over £1m and they wouldn't know me from a bar of soap. We may have done 50 jobs together and they've still never seen me.

The most they get is to hear a voice and see the writing. The funny thing is that's ok with the vast majority of them, they don't want to see a face or have a personality involved. How is this possible?

In order to explain, a rapid bit of landscape and background.

When an advertising agency selects a TVC Director for a moving image campaign for their client, the Film Director at the Production Company must first pitch back to the advertising agency to win the contract – against at least two other Directors at other companies. This competitive pitch takes the form of a document – images and text together outlining their approach – called a 'treatment'. Competition is murderous – there's big money at stake.

I've been in the media a while. Almost 25 years. Cut my teeth as a TV promo producer with BBC, MTV, etc. Moved into directing TVC commercials for many years. After a while it turned out that my pitch writing was better than my directing.

Other Directors started asking me for help and they started winning more pitches. Later I gave it up to become an ad Agency CD. Hated that so in a bizarre career shift became Ghostwriter ('correspondence officer') for some senior politicians and a Prime Minister.

That almost had me chewing the curtains so I went back to adland – as a self-employed full time Ghostwriter. Done well over 2,000 pitches over the last few years in over 30 countries. All via internet. Never met a single client in real life. Never want to. It would break the magic.

So, is Ghostwriting cheating? We often hear this.

The answer is yes.

In the same way as using a DOP, Art Director, Sound Designer, Editor, Grader, VFX Artist etc. is also cheating.

Film is a collaborative medium. Like any of the roles above, Ghostwriters work with Directors for the best possible end result. When Directors collaborate with experienced Ghostwriters, this can generate a lot of power.

The best Ghostwriters are used in a 'fourth creative' role – adding substantial input to the Director's vision of a project, working with them – and this is where it takes off.

The Director chooses how they want to work with the Ghostwriter (or any of the roles above). It may be a process of collaboration. Or it may be as a stenographer – in which case a Dictaphone and copy service would make do.

So – can a Ghostwriter add to the Director's vision? Yes, absolutely. Much depends on the personality of the Director. And of course, the Ghostwriter too – just learn to have no ego.

Ultimately, some Directors write great treatments themselves. But many don't. Some are constantly shooting, others don't have English as first language when it's needed. And some just want to up their game. Or have writer's block.

What's great about being a Ghostwriter?

- Work from home, or from anywhere in the world with a broadband and laptop. A true digital .
- Get to see some of the best creative concepts on the planet, weekly. Talk to some of the friendliest, craziest creative people and assist them with winning the pitch – contrary to popular belief 99% of the people in film production companies are really lovely people.
- Being completely, utterly anonymous even to your clients as you're under a pseudonym with the Skype camera permanently off.

What sucks about being a Ghostwriter?

- When they win major awards, we (me and the Ghostwriters at the company I founded to do this) shut the hell up. Confidentiality is the cornerstone of this business. Never show, never tell. Never ever.
- Never being able to socialise with the people I work with as we're always on different time zones.
- Working at all hours because of those time zone differences.
- Being completely, utterly anonymous – alone and completely expendable in a heartbeat.

So was Roald Dahl right?

Well yes and no...

For me, being a Ghostwriter is brilliant. It's taken me a long time to get here and be working on a level I love with likeminded people. I write. I surf. I travel. And have the kind of freedoms that others can only dream about. Just don't ask who I am. It really doesn't matter.

I might be that person over there. Or the person that passed you on the street just now. Truth is, you'll never know.

Alpha

Alpha is the pseudonym of a ghostwriter for The Moon Unit.
<http://www.themoonunit.net/>